



About Our Horse-Drawn Hearse

History

Believed to be the oldest of its kind in existence today, our horse-drawn hearse was built in the 1840s by John D. Edwards, a funeral director and carriage maker, in Faggs Manor, Londonderry Township, Pennsylvania. Edwards used the hearse at his own funeral home and later passed it on to his son, Charles, who succeeded his father in funeral service. (Another son, James, took over the carriage works.) Charles' son, J. Ralph, also became a funeral director, establishing a funeral home in West Grove, Pennsylvania, but, with the advent of the automobile, no longer used the horse-drawn hearse in funeral processions. The hearse, however, was kept on display and continued to be an Edwards family legacy until October 1994 when the current owner, great granddaughter Nancy Taylor Thompson Foulk, wife of West Grove funeral director Thomas J. Foulk, entrusted it to the care of Harvey C. Smith, Jr. and Frank C. Mayer, Jr., who were then co-owners of Spicer-Mullikin Funeral Homes.

In 2011, Matthew C. Smith, Harvey Smith's son, became the new owner of Spicer-Mullikin Funeral Homes and Crematory. He is now the proud custodian of the horse-drawn hearse, and looks forward to it staying in the Smith family for many more generations to come.

Characteristics

At the time it was built, our horse-drawn hearse did not share the highly ornate style of its contemporary European counterparts, but was instead crafted in the utilitarian and practical spirit of a young, rural America. Only later in the century did surplus income from a rising middle class, coupled with a greater population of immigrant artisans, allow for production of the elaborately decorated hearses common in Europe. The simplicity of the hearse's design does not, however, connote inferior or perfunctory workmanship. The hearse is solidly built of chestnut and oak (hardwoods that were readily available in South Central Pennsylvania) and weighs over 1600 pounds.

Painting alone, at the time our hearse was manufactured, took over three months to complete to allow for the application of many coats of slow-drying lacquer and the vigorous hand buffing required to create a lustrous, enduring finish. The hearse has two unique features that were uncommon in other early hearses: a bed equipped with rollers so that a casket could be maneuvered easily in and out of a false carriage top for storage.

In other similar hearses of the period, the name of the funeral home may have been painted on the window or engraved on a brass plaque that attached to the side of the hearse. Hearses were pulled by carefully matched teams of horses adorned with black veils and single black plumes on their heads. The horses, typically white in color, received excellent care and were generally not used for other hauling or travel. The rings connecting the horses' leather harnesses were usually painted white or decorated in some way to distinguish them from 'everyday' rigging. Unfortunately, the original rigging for our hearse has been lost.

Spicer-Mullikin is honored to be able to bring our antique hearse to the New Castle County community. The hearse is on permanent display at our Middletown location.

